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Reflective learning for purposeful change: making learning more explicit in multi-stakeholder processes

Femke Gordijn and Jan Helder

Explicitly integrating reflection in the learning process of multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) increases the likelihood that purposeful change will occur. When reflectivity is made part of learning in MSPs, learning will become clearer and better articulated and it will contribute more strongly to purposeful change in a complex context. MSP facilitators should deliberately include reflective learning sessions and tools in the process design and implementation. The paper also addresses the topic of selecting the most appropriate reflection tools such that they will be more effective in relation to the objectives when compared to randomly selecting a tool or to leave it solely to the preference of a facilitator.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder processes; tools; reflection; learning

Over the last 12 years, the Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) at Wageningen University, the Netherlands, has developed a framework to help practitioners involved in multi-stakeholder processes design and facilitate a process that is unique to the demands of their specific situation. One of the 7 key principles in this framework is learning. Learning has also been acknowledged by many other experts¹ as a key component of successful MSPs. In an MSP various activities are undertaken to address a certain joint problem while at the same time a learning process around these activities is taking place. Learning is the process that enables different stakeholders to understand each other, explore common concerns and ambitions, generate new ideas and/or take joint action. We assume that designed MSPs are successful if they contribute to a positive change, i.e. if a new, better situation or outcome will be achieved for the members of the MSP. Another assumption underlying this is that the direction of the change is determined by the stakeholders partaking in the process; that they have a joint vision.

So we argue that in order to see new possibilities for positive change, different stakeholders need to learn together from their respective experiences. Having a closer look at the learning process in an MSP, the learning process in MSPs can be separated into three components:

1. The planning of the learning process, with the learning objective(s) usually defined in the design phase of the MSP (e.g. to develop a common understanding of the problem, to do a situational analysis, to make a participatory design of the process, etc.).
2. The enabling or facilitation of the (experiential) learning process where stakeholders actually get together and information and experiences are shared and exchanged.

Stakeholders need to be engaged in deeply questioning, exploring and sharing their underlying assumptions about the problems they see, and the reasons why they favour particular strategies for action.

3. The reflective learning whereby the lessons learned are identified, shared, discussed and/or prioritised through which deeper learning can take place, that taken at heart and used for a strategy with an improved outcome, will contribute to the envisaged positive change.

Based on the experiences of the authors, not all these components of learning are consciously applied in the majority of MSPs. Frequently one or two of these are assumed to occur, especially in cases where very skilful process facilitators are employed. But the risk of neglecting this last learning component is that, although the MSP in itself can be reviewed as very successful in the short term, the positive change does not actually lead to a lasting impact. In analogy, this can be compared with the construction of a beautiful new train station where, alas, no train ever arrives or departs. Sometimes stakeholders wish to quickly move ahead towards designing and implementing their favourite strategies for change without allowing for a thorough reflection to better contextualise their strategies. By doing so, they risk coming up with interventions that tackle symptoms rather than causes and/or with short term solutions for long term problems.

In this short paper, the authors focus on the ‘third’ component of learning for successful MSPs: the reflective learning process. Here the identification of the lessons learned is made more explicit while sense-making is stimulated. Consequently, we think more purposeful change can occur. This reflection process will be further elaborated in this paper and illustrated with a number of reflection tools.

Illustrations and examples used in this paper have been drawn from a series of regular open, post-graduate training programs as well as a number of tailored programs and specific MSP workshops. In addition, tools for reflective learning are drawn from a toolkit that has been developed by the authors in the form of a manual for educators, facilitators and other professionals wishing to integrate reflective learning into the learning process with the ultimate purpose to contribute better to change.

Reflective learning: what is it?

Reflection is indicative of deep learning, and where teaching and learning activities such as reflection are missing... only surface learning can result. (Biggs 1999 in King 2002)

Reflection is a process that promotes deeper learning as it involves consciously thinking about and analysing an experience. It enables learners to activate prior knowledge and to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their own knowledge. Reflective learning involves stepping back from an event or experience to analyse it from different perspectives in order to make sense of it, and to improve future performance.

Reflective learning is part of many relevant mainstream learning concepts. In this paper we will refer to three of these concepts: the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984), triple loop

learning (Argyris 1991) and the conscious-competence learning model (Burch 1970). These concepts will be referred to in the context of adult education since virtually all MSPs concern groups of adults.

Experiential learning cycle

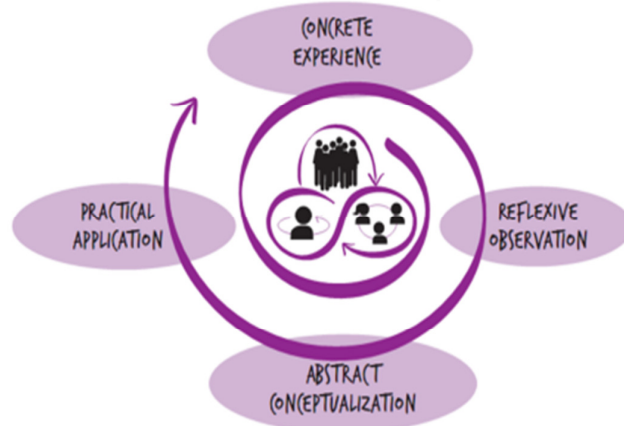


Figure 1: Model of the experiential learning cycle (after Kolb)

Kurt Levin, the American educational theorist David A. Kolb believes that ‘learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (1984, p. 38). Kolb presented a cyclical model of learning, consisting of four stages: concrete experience (“DO”), reflective observation (“REFLECT”), abstract conceptualization (“THINK”), and active experimentation (“PLAN”). One may start the process at any stage, but must then follow the cycle in the sequence. Kolb’s four-stage learning cycle shows how experience is translated through reflection into concepts, which in turn are used as guides for active experimentation for change. Reflective observation is when the learner consciously reflects back on that experience (Kolb, 1984).

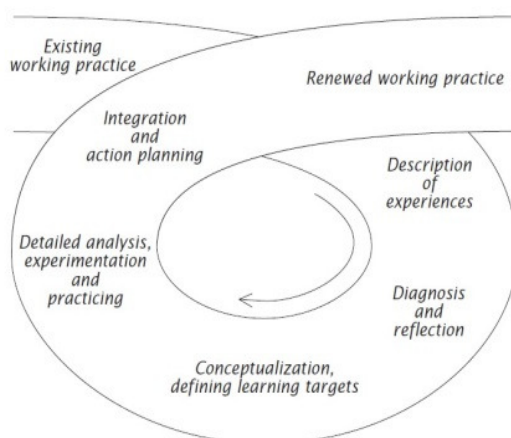


Figure 2: Model of reflective learning (Source: Authors)

The reflective learning that we advocate is part of this cycle (see Figure 2). In this approach, stakeholders get together in a MSP and learn from sharing experiences. They are able to conceptualize ideas by reflecting on their own practice, linking the problems of their own

reality to new theories and perspectives, and build new knowledge to change their existing practices and approaches. For example teaching staff from different universities, students, some private sector companies and a representative from the ministry of education came together in an MSP to address the problems in the educational system. They exchanged their experiences related to the educational system and we supported them in the reflection and analysis of their current system. This was complemented by some more theoretical input on educational systems from elsewhere. Through the MSP they adapted and improved their teaching practice, they improved their educational system and became more aware of the need to align to the labour market for the future career opportunities of their students.

There are some critical observations one can make towards Kolb's model of experiential learning. For instance, though it does mention reflection as an important stage in the learning cycle, it does not provide any deeper understanding of what thorough reflection entails. Furthermore, the model does not mention anything on cultural diversity, which is an intricate part of many MSP's, especially in an international context. Another issue is that learning is often far more complex than the model suggests. It does not take into account aspects like self-directed learning, implicit learning (sometimes people are not aware of the fact they learn, e.g. learning when not to speak, how to get things done, etc.), the role of emotions in learning (a lot of stress might block learning), and social learning (learning at group, system or societal level).

The triple-loop learning model

This model was developed by Argyris and complements Kolb's experiential learning cycle by addressing some of the latter's limitations. In this model, single-loop learning is about following the rules and improving existing actions. So far the model strongly resembles the learning cycle of Kolb. Double-loop and triple-loop learning are, however, not part of the cyclical model of Kolb. Double-loop learning is about changing the rules and thinking out of the box, questioning the current way of working and searching for new strategies. Triple-loop learning deals with the context and paradigms at a very fundamental level, the learning about learning and change. The focus of this learning concept is on challenging and changing underlying values and assumptions, and on solving problems that are complex (which is often the case in MSPs). We use this learning model for deeper learning and reflection, which can help to bring about changes in attitudes, assumptions and beliefs of stakeholders.

Three fundamental reflection questions form the bases for the respective learning loops and could be used in the reflective learning process:

1. Are we doing it right? (How can we improve what we do?)
2. Are we doing the right things? (Should we change our strategy?)
3. How do we decide what is right? (What is our paradigm, or theory of change?)

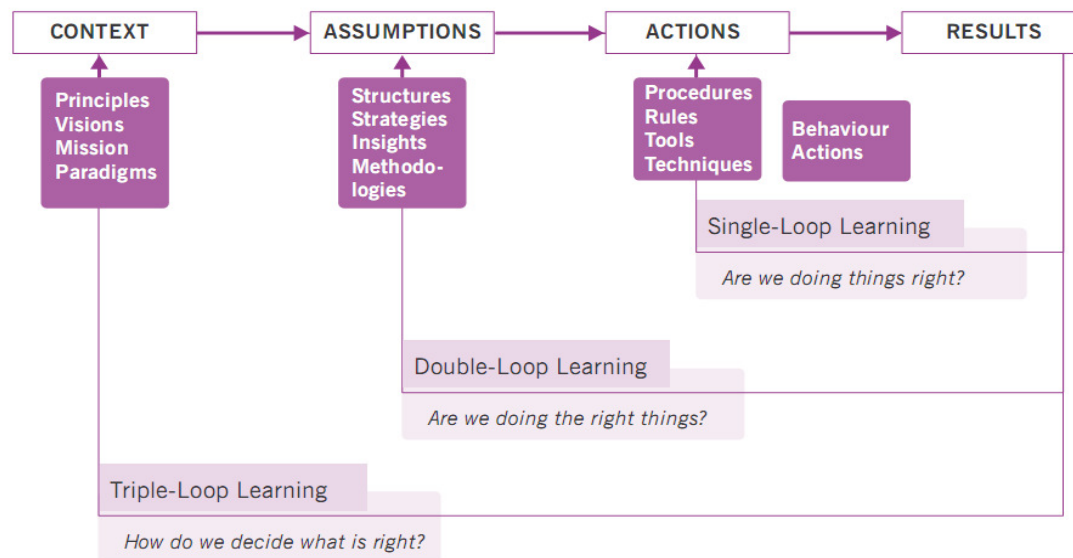


Figure 3: Single, double and triple loop learning (Source: Thorsten, 2006)

Competence learning model

The third concept that can be used to improve our understanding of learning is the so-called ‘conscious competence learning model’². The model is widely used by many practitioners in the field of learning and education, psychology and training. It simplifies the understanding of how the process of learning competences (might) take place.

The model distinguishes four phases in the learning process: first, a phase that can be typified as not being aware of lacking a certain knowledge, skill and/or approach: the learner is unconsciously incompetent.

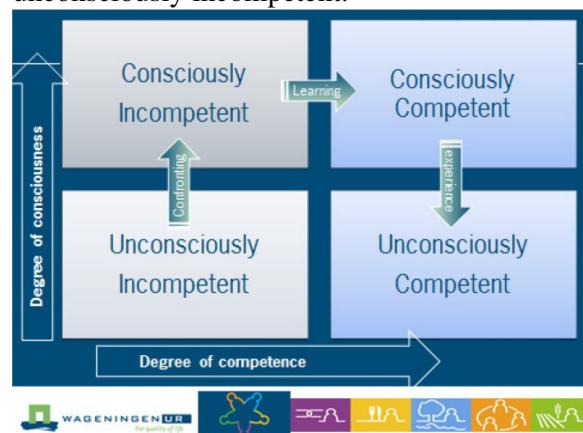


Figure 4: Phases of competence (Source: Authors)

The next phase is that the incompetence is being recognised: the learner becomes consciously incompetent which, in the next phase, through learning, is amended into consciously competent. Eventually, the competence is internalised and unconsciously applied: unconscious competent (e.g. one will finally be cycling and keeping their balance without thinking about it).

Adult education

In the context of adult education, three assumptions are of importance in relation to reflective learning:

- Adults learn mostly from peers if they consider an issue or topic relevant to their lives. They have developed self-knowledge and need self-motivation to change. They want both to receive and to share their own knowledge and experience. They have strong personal dignity and should be treated with respect. Most adults do not need (and do not like) to learn from a teacher.
- Adults are not empty vessels. They build on the knowledge they already have, hence they may also learn different things than was intended depending on their motivation, the learning climate and the learning methods.
- The role of the facilitator of a MSP differs from a traditional teacher's role. Adults are stimulated by sharing their own experiences, engaging in dialogue with their peers, and actively participating in the search for causes and solutions.

These assumptions concerning adult education imply that the facilitator of an MSP should work with the motivation of stakeholders by building on their existing knowledge and carefully facilitating their learning process.

Finally, it is relevant to pay attention to the type of learning and knowledge management required in complex systems like MSPs. Willshire stresses in her paper that to 'tolerate the state of not knowing in order for new ideas to be created' is one of the key competences of managers and facilitators of complex systems. But this can be an anxiety-provoking circumstance since it implies giving up the need for certainty in order for new, creative solutions to emerge (Wilshire, 1999). People need sufficient self-knowledge to allow for the uncomfortable situation of not-knowing that may be a precondition for a state of coming to know, continually being open to new possibilities. A more reflective and less controlling approach to learning is appropriate where educators relinquish some certainty but create an environment where the learner him/herself can take more responsibility for the learning process (Thompson and McGivern, 1996). So this requires both cognitive and emotional involvement of the stakeholders in the learning process.

Reflective learning: why is it necessary?

Reflection can help to better understand one's own strengths and weaknesses, identify and question underlying values and beliefs, acknowledge and challenge assumptions on which stakeholders base their ideas, feelings and actions, recognize areas of potential bias or discrimination, acknowledge fears, and identify possible areas for improvement. Reflection can lead to greater self-awareness, which in turn is a first step to positive change – it is a necessary stage in identifying areas for improvement and growth in both professional and MSP contexts. Taking time to reflect can help one to identify approaches that have worked well, and in that way reinforce good practice. It helps to develop critical thinking and analytical, meta-cognitive skills. This can help to inform what might need to be done differently, or how people may need to develop and change their behaviour or practice.

Furthermore it requires energy to learn and there is often resistance to change. Sometimes it helps to have a 'kick-starter' to put the cognitive process in motion. When stakeholders in a MSP reflect, they can relate new experiences and insights to their own curiosity, motivation, needs or desires. They link the learning process to their own incentives and perspective. Furthermore, reflective learning is more important in adult learning because professionals often have limited time. The learning events are often shorter and reflective exercises can contribute to deeper learning and professional growth.

Another important consideration for promoting reflective learning is the complexity of the context in which the learning takes place. Especially in MSPs, groups of people get together because of a shared, particular challenge or problem in a particular context. This is a precondition for MSPs to become successful: stakeholders get together to aim for a purposeful, positive change. There will be various workshops and meetings planned where elements of learning are envisaged, but for as much as there is planned learning, there will most likely also be unplanned, spontaneous learning taking place. Because of the complexity of a situation around which the MSP is organised, the limited information available and the different realities the stakeholders bring to the table, we believe that linking and sense-making are crucial steps to take before purposeful change can transpire.

A way to stimulate unplanned learning and innovation to occur is to deliberately create an environment with a high density of interactions between stakeholders who are sufficiently connected to a given context. This creates a fertile ground for new properties to emerge. We believe that planned reflectivity during as well as at the end or after the MSP activities will be crucial to crystallise this learning and, as such, enable a better understanding and handling of the situational complexity whilst simultaneously contributing to (capturing) deeper meaning.

Reflective learning is *not* meant for evaluation purposes. Though it might have some elements of that nature, it is not its primary objective. Nor is one of its objectives to reproduce or assess existing knowledge. It is not meant for aiming to reach a specific learning objective (skill development) like for example riding a bicycle or improving one's presentation skills. For such type of more concrete competence development one might choose a different type of 'debriefing' including more structured feedback. The type of reflective learning that is referred to here is a more open learning process where people take the time to make sense of the multiple aspects of their learning, to give meaning, and by doing so in a group, also inspire each other in this process. It is about fine-tuning reflection as an explicit part of learning in a MSP. By doing so the overall learning process will improve and become more explicit and better articulated and contribute more powerfully to purposeful change in a complex context. This process does not happen by itself since people tend to jump to solutions. MSP facilitators are therefore strongly advised to deliberately include reflective learning sessions and tools in the process design and implementation. So the main objectives of using tools for reflection include: digesting all information and experiences within the MSP, drawing out lessons learnt, relating these to one's own context and the context of the other stakeholders. In addition, when appropriately applied, reflectivity has the potential to strengthen group dynamics and foster a conducive learning environment. Furthermore, it is about sense-making and innovation and creating a fertile ground for new properties to emerge. Last but not least: it can be energizing and fun.



Figure 5: Learning within MSPs (Source: Authors)

Reflective learning: how is it done?

In general, reflective learning is stimulated after a time of activities in the MSP. When there is a longer timespan where people meet and interact on a daily basis, a short reflection of 30 min could be done every day to capture the learning and make sense of all that has happened. When stakeholders meet once in a while, the reflection sessions will also be less frequent and are used to not only reflect on what happened in the whole group, but also on the experiences outside of the joint meetings. Reflection should not be done in isolation. Talking over a situation or experience with someone can be an excellent way of starting to reflect – distancing oneself from it a little, breaking it down, looking at it from a different perspective, analysing what happened and why, and deciding how one would handle it differently next time. Reflective learning will be more effective when a particular reflection tool is carefully chosen and facilitated. In the following section we will mention two important choices the facilitator needs to make and we will highlight three important issues to think about when preparing reflection sessions: language, cultural sensitivity and finally trust and resistance.

The first choice is that one needs to synchronise and choose the right tool with the right moment in the process. In a new group that is unfamiliar with the practice of reflective learning it can be helpful to first discuss questions like: ‘What makes a good learning point? What are the characteristics of a lesson learned?’ Examples of lessons learned could include: ‘I learned that poverty reduction can only be achieved by focussing on farmers as economic actors in the value chain’ or: ‘I understand now what the impact is of my assumptions on my decision-making behaviour’ or: ‘I learned how to do a stakeholder analysis using the power analysis tool’. Next, the stakeholders can be asked to think individually and in silence of the (one) most important learning outcome of a given time (yesterday’s session, last week) and write it down on a card. Subsequently the participants can mingle and pair up. The pairs exchange learning outcomes, discussing their value and accuracy. Participants try to talk to as many people as possible. This is followed by a brief, plenary discussion about the most important learning outcomes and how to formulate a lesson learned. To facilitate the choice of

the tool we have categorized them by the timing/phase in the MSP when they are most suitable, and to the level of creativity and energy it creates versus the more analytical approaches (see Figure 5).

Secondly, a facilitator has to make a conscious choice about who is facilitating the reflection sessions. We believe that it is important that the facilitator is able to use the learning concepts and has a clear objective and vision in mind when facilitating the reflection. We therefore advise to use a neutral and skilful facilitator who is trained in using the learning concepts and who knows how to foster deeper learning. Furthermore, if the facilitator is perceived as neutral, i.e. not having any stake in the MSP, stakeholders can speak out more freely on how they felt about their experience. In some cases, the facilitation can be delegated to one or a few stakeholders (small group), for example in case the focus of the MSP is about facilitation and learning. The advantage here is that there is greater ownership of the reflection process within the group, and it offers them a possibility to practice their facilitation skills. A disadvantage is that the quality of the reflection is sometimes poor in terms of deeper learning and in distinguishing key issues from less important ones. Participants of the MSP have the tendency to do a recap/summary of what was done, as a repetition rather than deeper reflection. A hybrid form in which a trained facilitator *and* stakeholders alternately facilitate the reflections can be the practical reality which works reasonably well.

Language is an important issue to consider especially when working in an international context. Some of the tools are more visual so people with language limitations (e.g. only speaking their local language) can still use those tools. Another option is that people work in subgroups in their own language, in order to have a deeper discussion. Working with an interpreter always impairs direct feeling and connection with the stakeholders. If one works with an interpreter, one has to be sure that the reflection questions are translated properly to ensure that the reflection is going in the right direction.

Cultural sensitivity and personal boundaries have to be taken into account as well. For the deeper learning to occur people will have to come out of their comfort zone, open up to new realities and be willing to look at their own struggles. For this, a basic level of trust and safety is required. It is advised to not overstretch personal boundaries or people might block, close up and not learn anymore. We also advise not to use games or tools where people will get rewarded or 'punished' for something. Though it might seem to create a lot of fun, this is superfluous and individuals might feel hurt or excluded. Instead of promoting learning, the opposite is achieved. Creative, diverse and alternative reflection methods, mixing visual audio, informal and/or intuitive tools too, cater to the more practical learners, analytical learners as well as creative thinkers as well as to different learning styles in multicultural groups of stakeholders. We argue that reflective learning is useful for all stakeholders, no matter their cultural background or education.

In the process of drawing out lessons learned and developing new meaning, it frequently happens that people become resistant, doubtful and/or prejudiced by their own treasured opinions based on their values. For example when people want to help the poorest of the poor but learn, in the MSP, that their potential impact is limited, they might feel frustrated and revolt and/or reject this 'reality'. Allowing this frustration to be ventilated and acknowledging the resistance as well as facilitate the stimulation of a debate is an important element in the reflective learning.

For ideas on different tools to stimulate reflection and make learning more explicit, there is a toolkit on reflection methods (Gordijn et al, 2012) in which more than 30 different reflection methods are described. Many of these methods are not completely new, but the authors have made an effort to collect, group and/or adapt them and, to make them more accessible for MSP facilitators, trainers and trainees.

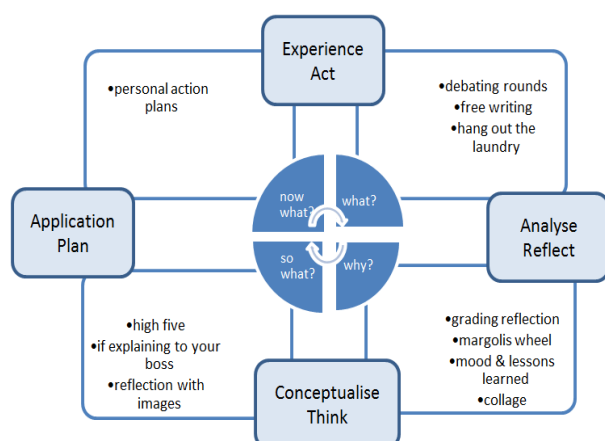


Figure 6: Sequencing of MSPs (Source: Authors)

Reflection tools can be categorized by the sequencing in the MSP (when they are used) versus the level of creativity and energy they create. An alternative way to categorise the tools is to link them to the learning concepts. When applied to the learning cycle of Kolb, most tools are in the domain of reflection, conceptualisation and application but some of the tools are more suitable for reflection and conceptualisation, while others are more relevant for planning or application.

Of course in the end it is not so much about the format of the tool, but more about the type of questions being asked to stimulate the reflective learning. Relating this to the triple loop learning model, questions that can encourage the deeper 'double loop' learning include:

- Are you/we using the right strategy to solve this problem?
- Are there other ways to look at this problem?
- What is most challenging or provoking so far? Why and what does that mean?
- Did anything surprise you or made you feel uncomfortable? Why and what does that mean?
- What have we not talked about or, in other words: by doing this, what did we not do?

The reflection booklet also contains an annex listing a wide range of reflection questions that can be used one on one or inspire the formulation of new ones.

The practice of reflective learning: some case examples

One example where we applied reflective learning in an MSP was in South Africa. Amongst

other things we facilitated a workshop with various stakeholders from different universities. After a day of presentations, a short excursion, some interactive problem analysis and a debate on the role of the university in society, the next morning we asked the people to reflect for half an hour before the next day's programme began. We used the **Margolis Wheel**³ because the people had been working with each other already for quite a while but we wanted to stimulate some more personal exchange and in-depth discussions. People had to sit in two circles, facing each other and the questions were discussed in pairs.



Figure 7: The Margolis wheel in action

The reflection questions we used were: What was the most important learning point on a personal level that you gained from yesterday's experience? What was the most important learning point on an organisational level that you gained from yesterday's experience? People get about 5 to 7 minutes to discuss this question with the person in front of them. Then for the next round the people sitting in the inner circle move one chair to the left, so they would be facing a new person in front of them, and they get a new question to discuss with that person. We continued this for three rounds.

Another case example was a MSP in Sierra Leone with the objective to improve maternal health. Various stakeholders from different sectors (mostly public) were working together to achieve this goal. After a while we organised a meeting to review the process and stimulate reflective learning. We used **statements** and **debating rounds**, **open reflections**, and **collaboratively answering questions**. Through these sessions the stakeholders discovered the gaps in their collaboration process and the need for a more clearly defined theory of change. Though they were all working on the improvement of maternal health, they adopted different approaches, some complementary but others competitive or even counter-productive. By reflective learning they could collaboratively strategize for more effective and purposeful change.

A last example that we describe here relates to the open and tailor-made courses. These can be viewed as a special type of MSPs. For instance, in the annual three week course 'Market Access for Sustainable Development' that we organize some 30 – 40 development practitioners with various professional backgrounds and from a wide range of countries join together to strengthen their capacities in the field of making markets work for the poor. During the course, a selection of participants' cases is developed into realistic, strategic action plans. Once implemented, these plans have a very high likelihood to contribute to purposeful change through shaping an enabling environment in which markets can help to reduce the incidence of poverty. In addition, at the end of the course, all participants have increased their professional knowledge and competences. With these strengthened capacities they are better equipped to support processes of purposeful change in their respective local realities. During

the course, **every day starts with a reflection session of at least 30 minutes** moderated by a professional MSP facilitator. These sessions are fine-tuned and varied in such a way that also the deeper lessons learned will transpire, as much as possible. Without integrating this process of reflectivity in the course's program, the actual learning would have been far less explicit and, consequently, the ultimate contribution of the participants to positive and purposeful change in their own respective context would have been less significant as well. Based on the experiences in this and other courses where we apply similar integrated sets of reflection sessions, we can state with confidence that, in this particular type of MSPs, reflective learning is an essential tool to achieve purposeful change.

There are many more examples from our own experiences that can be drawn from. Moreover we would like to invite MSP practitioners to send us examples from their 'reflective practices' that have, to some extent, proven to contribute to positive and purposeful change.

Reflective learning: feedback from stakeholders

So far, most people we have been working with highly appreciate the reflective learning sessions. They find them both stimulating, inspiring and purposeful. Many people want to use reflective learning in their own context as well (especially those active in educational settings). One example of the feedback received, is:

The reflection session was very important to remember and identify the different learning points. It's creative, activating and having fun. The reflections made us remember the former days learning, structure our thinking and link it to the current day's work.

Table 1 shows that over 90% of the participants (36 in total) from the 2012 edition of the international course 'Market access for sustainable development' ranked the reflection sessions from good to excellent in terms of contributing to their learning (Survey Monkey Evaluation 2012). And yes, reflection can be fun, but it is not a joke: it is about deeper learning for change.

Conclusions

Reflective learning involves stepping back from an event or experience to analyse it from different perspectives, with a view to improving future performance. This can be facilitated by carefully selecting the most relevant reflection tool at the right moment with a clear objective in mind. It is not a tool for evaluation.

Having deliberately used and facilitated reflection session in MSPs over the last five years and having put forward our main arguments, let us now come back to our starting assumption that reflective learning is an important factor for success in MSPs. Most MSPs are means to address complex development challenges and call for collective strategies and innovative solutions. Reflective learning is a crucial step to stimulate linking, sense-making and eventually purposeful change. As was highlighted in the case examples and in the feedback of the stakeholders, through the reflection sessions people became more aware of their

assumptions, got inspired through the learning of others and improved their behaviour to more effectively contribute to the MSP outcomes.

Table 1: Course participants' opinion of reflection sessions

31. To what extent have the reflection sessions contributed to your learning?		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Very poor	0.0%	0
Poor	2.8%	1
Adequate	5.6%	2
Good	33.3%	12
Excellent	58.3%	21
answered question		36
skipped question		0

So we conclude that reflection is an effort, but by fine-tuning reflection as an explicit part of learning in MSPs the likelihood for purposeful change does increase. Therefore we advise MSP facilitators and/or those responsible for process design, to not only deliberately plan for reflective learning in the design of the MSP but, in addition, to ensure that they are aware of the objectives of the deeper reflection at different moments in the process.

As for the future, we are planning to fine-tune the different methods and publish the second edition of our booklet on reflection methods by the end of 2013, which includes also more e-tools suitable for a laptop or tablet. Furthermore we will continue to study the impact of using reflection methods in MSPs to further build the evidence base to display that it does contribute to more purposeful change and furthermore learn how we can improve the effectiveness of it.

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Notes

¹ Beers, Sol and Wals (2010), Mierlo (2010), Woodhill and Brouwer (to be published in 2013), Senge (2006), Waddell (2005), Hemmati (2002) and various articles in Capacity.ORG: Facilitating multi-actor change, Issue 41, December 2010.

² Though N. Bulch, when employed by Gordon Training International, is often quoted as having developed this model, the origins of the model are actually not very clear; see BusinessBalls.com.

³ Gordijn & Helder (2012). Reflection Methods. tool 3.13, p38